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ABSTRACT

A preliminary analysis of the language syllabuses and language students at Southampton University (England) is used to determine needed improvements in language teaching methodology and to establish clear aims and objectives that will build on students' previous experiences, plug gaps that remain, and relate this language learning to the components of the courses and to future professional use of the language. An emphasis on translation skills would remain, but would shift from being that of preparing students for a prose or unseen in the final examinations to that of preparation for more vocationally-focused language learning. The paper suggests that the typical translation/prose-based program plus unstructured conversation classes constitute inappropriate methodology for foreign language teaching and has limited objectives. After detailed descriptions of the students and the particular language program at Southampton University (England), it is concluded that it remains essential to convince colleagues of the need for language specialists and to explain the rationale and goals of new language teaching methods to both students and teachers. (Contains four references.) (NAV/Author)

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Putting "Language" Back into the Modern Languages Degree

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PUTTING 'LANGUAGE' BACK IN THE MODERN LANGUAGES DEGREE

Clare Mar-Molinero and Patrick Stevenson

Introduction

The revolution and innovation of the past decade that have taken place in modern languages teaching of the 11–16 age group and which have resulted in thorough re-examination of the of the A-level syllabuses are only slowly making an impression on teaching methods and syllabus design in the university sector. In the polytechnic sector, significant changes and new courses have been introduced, which both build on the experience students will have had at school and respond more closely to their vocational expectations. The universities, however, have in the main been slow to change their traditional language programmes.

The authors of this paper share the conviction that the typical translation/prose-based programme plus unstructured conversation classes constitutes inappropriate methodology for foreign language teaching and has limited objectives. We recognise the constraints in the system that have produced and maintained this situation: non-language specialists being required to teach language classes; the courses then becoming entirely examination-led; these examinations reflecting a very limited view of language competence as the ability to translate difficult literary texts; the language courses being artificially isolated from other components of the degree course; and the stagnant job-market not allowing for any major change of staff to permit the introduction of new ideas and specialisms. However, despite these constraints, we have initiated moves to re-examine the language syllabuses at the university where we work, with the principal aims of improving the language teaching methodology, and of establishing clear aims and objectives for the language courses, which will both build realistically on students' previous experiences and plug gaps that will remain, and will also relate the language learning to other components of the courses and to future professional use of the language[1]. The generalisations stated below about the type of student and type of existing course relate specifically to Southampton, but we are certain that this is not an unfamiliar picture in many other universities and that fundamental changes in language teaching in modern languages degrees are needed in many sister institutions. It is with this belief that we offer some preliminary suggestions and analysis, with the hope that colleagues with relevant experience will be interested in joining the discussion.

The Student

The modern languages student coming up to university with two languages studied at A-level (often together with English), having studied Latin at least to O-level, was a very different student to that which we find today. The student had a well-learnt grounding in basic traditional grammar in all the languages studied, had been well-trained in translation work, had read a good sample of significant literary texts in the target language and was (more or less) competent in writing short formal essays in the language on reasonably abstract subjects. Quite often the student had been fortunate enough to take part in an exchange visit to at least one of the countries whose language they were studying. But, on the whole, the oral competence of the students was not the most accomplished of their skills, reflecting the individual's experience and opportunities rather than general classroom practice.

We now observe a very different student, with many of the characteristics described above no longer applying. It is particularly evident that students do not any more start their university courses with a sound grasp of grammatical concepts and terminology (see Bloor 1986 a, b, c; Mar-Molinero 1987)[2]. Many of the new A-level syllabuses allow the student the option of not studying any literary texts, concentrating instead on the history and politics of the relevant country. Whilst translation and essay-writing do still feature to some extent in the A-level examinations, they have been reduced considerably in the new GCSE syllabuses (and at some levels removed completely). The total commitment to communicative language teaching methodology which underlies the GCSE courses may well result in further changes in the A-level syllabuses. It certainly produces a very different type of language student: one who, on the whole, will be more competent in comprehension skills, more ready to try to communicate, less inhibited by the fear of inaccuracies, but also less practised in producing the written language. The emphasis on the functions of particular authentic – usually fairly informal – situations will equip the student with a very different range of vocabulary and idioms.

Apart from the shift in emphasis in the linguistic preparation of the modern language student, universities will have to cater also for those who are less well-equipped if they are to accept those students with only AS-level passes. This is just one example of the broadening experiences that university undergraduates will increasingly bring to a first year course. Access students and students from other countries in the European Community are further examples of students with varying backgrounds all expecting to study together.

We can expect too that the modern languages student, in common with all university students, has become far more demanding in terms of the perceived 'usefulness' of the degree's content. The extent to which the syllabus should respond to this attitude is controversial; the reality, however, is that market forces make some response necessary.

The Traditional Language Programme

Language teaching in universities suffers from the circular problem that the majority of those teaching it are not specialists and see these classes as only a necessary duty. Their methods and objectives tend, therefore, to reflect their own experiences as language learners at university. At its worst this produces an endless diet of literary translations and proses, although this may admittedly lead to a high degree of proficiency in dealing with such material. Essay writing in the foreign language is often considered an important intellectual activity for language students, but very little real linguistic preparation for this very difficult exercise is normally provided. The oral/aural practice of the foreign language is left largely to the native-speaking language assistants, who may or may not have any experience or skills as language teachers. The advent of language laboratories, videos and, recently, satellite TV has been a useful addition in this area, but too often these are under-used or used in an unguided way by lecturers and students alike.

It is notable that a recent programme to recruit new young academics, launched by the UFC in 1989, has allowed a significant number of modern languages departments to advertise for language specialists, and it will be very interesting to see (a) whether these specialists exist and (b) in what way this is changing the traditional language programmes.

Southampton has not been able to make such appointments to date and has had to count on the interests and limited expertise already available within its School of Modern Languages to re-examine and to re-design its language programmes. Most colleagues do accept a general need to change and to up-date language teaching methods. The proposals outlined below have been accepted in principle. The practical implementation, however, is only beginning and the risk must always exist that any changes will be merely cosmetic. It may prove difficult to persuade over-stretched colleagues to invest the necessary work for fundamental changes in methodology and objectives. In particular, the scarcity of appropriate materials is a problem and even the excellent broadcast material now available requires many hours of editing in order to produce useful classroom activities.

The Overall Aims and Objectives of the Language Component of the ML Degree

In Southampton's School of Modern Languages, three main languages are offered at single or combined honours level: French, German and Spanish. Portuguese is also available to honours level. German, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch can all be taken as *ab initio* courses, which can be continued as part of an honours programme. This latter category of language provision has already benefitted greatly from the adoption of modern FL and EFL teaching methods and materials. It is in the area of the post-A-level courses that a thorough re-examination has been taking place.

Most single or combined honours language degrees at Southampton consist of four years study. The third year is spent in a country where one of languages studied is spoken. During this period abroad, the School of Modern Languages normally requires students to produce a 10,000-word dissertation in one of the languages they study. The majority of the language courses in each of the three remaining years are examined by course work and end of course examinations. In the language component, only the final year course work and examinations count towards the final degree mark.

With one or two exceptions, the pattern of language courses has, until recently, been very close to the traditional type described above, with a predominant emphasis on translation and the written language. Increasing use has been made of the language laboratory and videos, although largely by the language assistants. For some years the final year Spanish department students have been taught introductory interpreting skills. The examinations also largely reflect a fairly conventional approach, focusing mainly on translations, proses and essay writing. Dissatisfaction with this model has been felt by some staff for a while and ad hoc improvements have been experimented with. The outline syllabuses which we have recently drawn up and have had approved build on what we see as existing good practices, as well as making recommendations for innovations. Above all, there is a desire to give coherence across the School in all the language provision, wherever possible by agreeing common goals and common methodology.

To this end, a list of the overall objectives which the student should attain by the end of the degree course in the four main linguistic skills was agreed. It is accepted that teaching these skills in discrete categories is impossible and undesirable – but that, for the purposes of the overall goals, this is useful. These goals are:

ORAL SKILLS

— Near-native pronunciation and intonation.

— Fluency in the use of the colloquial language.

— Appropriateness and adequacy in formal and informal language of a public and private nature.

AURAL SKILLS

— Near-native command in informal (private and public) situations.

— High competence in formal situations.

— Ability to recognise and use the different strategies needed for different types of listening.

WRITING SKILLS

— Total competence in standard grammar.

— Awareness of appropriate registers.

— Ability to produce a range of written texts from the informal letter, to job application, to book review and even academic paper.

READING SKILLS

— Ability to read for information retrieval and/or summary with near-native speed.

— Ability to identify all different text types.

— Competence in dictionary skills.

— Confidence to read for pleasure.

The balance of the four language skills and of emphasis on informal or formal language will necessarily vary from year to year of the course. But the three taught years should be organised hierarchically to arrive at these overall goals. It was also felt that during the students' degree course there should be some general and language-specific introduction to language study skills and general language awareness. It was also hoped to introduce specialised language courses that could be taken as degree options in the second and final years on top of the basic compulsory language course.

With the agreement on the overall goals, syllabuses for the three taught courses have been drawn up. A separate language study skills course has been designed to complement the language work in the first year, whilst language awareness components are recommended as part of the final year language course in each specific language. Staffing limitations have meant that language options are so far only few, but the principle at least is accepted.

The following three course syllabuses are at different stages of implementation, but do now broadly form a common goal. Each one assumes three hours contact per week for the student, one of which will normally be with the language assistant.

The First Year Language Syllabus

As first year students have followed a variety of different A-level syllabuses, some with more emphasis on language than others, the main aim should be to make sure that by the end of the year all are familiar with the most important features of the contemporary foreign language and can understand and use it with reasonable confidence. More specifically, they should by then be able to:

— read a longish text (e.g. from a 'serious' newspaper) without translating as they go along and without looking up all unknown words;

— understand the FL spoken (at least in certain contexts) at natural speed;

— write texts in the FL that are reasonably clear, accurate and authentic-sounding;

— speak the FL fairly fluently in informal situations.

Throughout the first term, in addition to classes in the respective languages, all first year language students will have a series of *Language Study Skills* lectures. The object of these lectures is to help them develop the essential skills that are needed to study *any* language. Topics include: grammatical terms and sentence analysis, vocabulary building, using dictionaries, composition, summary writing, punctuation and using language learning technology (language lab, computer, video, etc.).

The Second Year Language Syllabus

The principal aim of the second year language course should be to prepare students linguistically for the year abroad. The language course should include materials which act as background information about the countries where the students will be living, as well as the situations they will find themselves in when abroad.

In the receptive skills of listening and reading, the objective should be to give the students as wide a range as possible of language situations, registers and varieties.

In the case of the spoken language, students need to be presented with and made aware of the wide variety of different accents and dialects – both geographical and social – that they might encounter. It will be necessary to build up and maintain as much recorded material on audio and video cassette as possible. Students will need to concentrate on day-to-day routine situations, but exposure to formal speech, such as lectures (which might be given by the language assistants), will also be important.

Reading material will need to include a wide range of materials of a very immediate and practical nature, such as banking forms, menus, newspapers of all sorts, accommodation contracts and university prospectuses. The aim should be, therefore, to cover many written registers in order to familiarise students with what they are likely to encounter. At the same time, it is essential to be aware of the problems and characteristics of more formal written language which the students will be encountering in other parts of their degree course (literary texts, historical texts, criticism, etc.).

The productive skills can be developed focusing not only on everyday use for when the students are abroad, but also on preparation for writing the dissertation.

In oral classes students should be encouraged not only to practise fluent informal language use, but also to prepare for more formal situations, such as conducting interviews or giving mini-classes. Simulation exercises, including interviews, should be developed for this, with the video camera and tape recorder being used.

Written work will need to range from the very practical, such as letter-writing and filling in forms, to the skills needed for academic writing.

The Fourth Year Language Syllabus

The final year language course tends to be the course which is most strongly led by assessment requirements. To some extent these requirements must reflect national standards and patterns and, therefore, radical changes need to be phased in with wide consensus.

The overall aim of the course is to bring together the threads of the past three years' language study and to provide the student with a high standard of linguistic competence across a wide range of language activities. This will involve both

reinforcing the level attained from residence abroad and further stretching the students. It is important to realise the need to be flexible and adaptable to the experience the students bring to the final year. Whilst all four basic language skills should be covered equally, listening comprehension, in particular, may well be found to be stronger if the group consists largely of students who have spent the majority of their third year in the country of the target language. The course should include the following components to at least some extent:

— Translation work (both ways), which should contain translation critique, as well as allow the opportunity for regular grammar review.

— A language awareness component, which would to some extent overlap with translation critique, teaching students to analyse the linguistic components of a text, including syntactic and semantic characteristics and, particularly, register awareness. This would also allow for some introductory work on language for specific purposes, with examples of such registers as legal language, business language, medical language, media language, etc. being covered.

— Listening comprehension work, which would range from the formal lectures given by native speakers to extensive use of audio, video and satellite material. Much of this work could be followed by the student in well-planned self-directed study.

— Introduction to interpreting.

— Written and oral productive skills would, of course, be covered in some or all of the above components, but should also include a certain amount of short essay writing on carefully guided topics or oral presentations on formal topics.

An emphasis on translation skills would remain, but would shift from being that of preparing students for a prose or unseen in the final exams to that of preparation, in part, for the Institute of Linguists' new Diploma in Translation, thus satisfying student demands for more vocationally-focused language learning. This will be further helped by language awareness work and discussion of specialised registers.

Conclusion

It is really too early to know how radical a change in language teaching habits all staff will be able and prepared to make. The implementation of these proposals is still, therefore, patchy. Clearly the success of any change cannot easily be assessed at such a preliminary stage. Success, in fact, may be judged at present as much in terms of persuading colleagues of the need for change and of the types of changes rather than whether Southampton's School of Modern Languages is over-subscribed and is producing competent well-trained linguists after four years of study. The infra-structure in terms of language resources and technology has certainly improved and many more staff are willing to learn to use these. More importantly, perhaps, the students too are far keener now to spend time in the university's Language Resources Centre. Even amongst the students though there can be mistrust of non-traditional communicative language teaching methods. Many lament the lack of translation work, particularly in the first year. This, in part, reflects the transition we are experiencing before the genuine GCSE-taught students arrive. It remains essential to explain to students and staff alike the rationale behind the teaching methods, as well as the goals being aimed at during each stage. It also remains essential to convince colleagues that, as posts do become available, language specialists are as important to a department's profile as any other expert when priorities are being discussed.

Notes

1. The proposals described in this paper were formulated after lengthy discussion by the School of Modern Languages' Language Teaching Forum. We are grateful to our co-members of this Forum, Drs. Rodney Ball, John Crosbie and Mike Rogers, for their ideas and suggestions.

2. It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the reasons for the change of emphasis from grammar-based teaching nor the often heated arguments over whether grammar should be taught and how it might be taught. These discussions have been widely aired in the literature and in public debate in recent years, and the recent preparations for the introduction of the National Curriculum in Britain have brought these to the fore once more. They are issues, however, of which all language teachers must clearly be aware.

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